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Dialogue among civilizations

Letter dated 8 November 1999 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to attach the text of the statement made by the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Sayed Mohammad Khatami, at the thirtieth session of the General Conference of UNESCO, on 29 October 1999. The statement concerns the President's conception of dialogue among civilizations (see annex).

I should be grateful if this letter and its annex were circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 34.

(*Signed*) **Hadi Nejad-Hosseinian**
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Annex

[Original: French]

Statement made on 29 October 1999 by the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the thirtieth session of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

I am happy to be able to speak to you on my own behalf and on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the occasion of the last UNESCO General Conference to be held in this century of the Christian era.

My presence in France enables me to accept the kind invitation of Mr. Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, and to be here today, alongside representatives of human cultures and civilizations.

Our presence here is proof of the fact that, astonishing though it may seem, the newly developed media and means of communication cannot satisfy the need human beings feel for personal and direct contact in order to establish a dialogue conducive to peace — this fact was certainly not lost on the founding fathers of the United Nations system.

UNESCO occupies a privileged position among the specialized agencies of the United Nations when it comes to creating conditions favourable to dialogue. In fact, its many activities in the fields of education, culture, science and communications provide it with a particularly broad area for making its contribution to peace.

That is undoubtedly why the international welcome for Mr. Mayor's initiative regarding the project "Towards a Culture of Peace" was an enthusiastic one.

Let us hope that this initiative will enable UNESCO to achieve its main objective, which is to construct the defences of peace in the minds of men.

I must therefore thank Mr. Mayor for the efforts that have been made during his mandate to bring UNESCO's action more closely into line with its real aspirations.

I should like to discuss with you here an important question which touches on both the cultural and the political areas of life, and which may have a significant impact on the future of mankind by helping to rid it of its uglier aspects and giving it a little more moral content, spirituality and beauty.

I am well aware of the fact that excessive optimism regarding rapid results from the "dialogue among cultures and civilizations" would be as inappropriate as exaggerated pessimism and dwelling on the current state of the world and the obstacles to such a "dialogue".

That is why we must, at the outset, prepare ourselves for a long and tortuous journey, bearing in mind that if this proposal becomes a reality, it may change the historical and political destiny of mankind.

Given that the international community does not always lend an attentive ear to proposals of this kind, the fact that the idea of a "dialogue among civilizations" has been favourably received in international forums, by States as well as by

intellectuals and the general public, is in itself of great importance, particularly since one of those forums is the General Assembly of the United Nations.

History abounds with examples of peoples being repeatedly invited by their reformers, intellectuals and revolutionaries to rediscover their roots or to found societies on the traditional values of mankind. But those peoples responded positively to such exhortations only once and at a specific moment in history.

It is not possible to list the causes of such events by referring to the usual precepts of sociology, political science and common philosophical theories, especially since such interpretations often contain intrinsic contradictions or weaknesses in argumentation. So, let us set aside political considerations and national interests, and focus instead on the most complex factors of society in order to understand why the proposal for a "dialogue among civilizations", which was put forward for the first time in the General Assembly of the United Nations by the Islamic Republic of Iran, has been received with such acclaim.

The "dialogue among cultures and civilizations" can be interpreted or justified in different ways and at different levels. If the interpretation is "indicative" and "descriptive", it falls within the purview of sciences such as archaeology, general history, including the history of cultures and civilizations, ethnology, political sociology, social psychology and political philosophy; if the interpretation is "prescriptive", it is a matter for ethics and the moral sciences, philosophy and the legal sciences, international relations and educational psychology.

In order to begin this dialogue "correctly" we must think about the terms in which the debate should be conducted. This means that when engaging in philosophical and historical discourse we must be sure to bring out the dialectical dimensions and develop the views of the great thinkers of the past. I am not able to go into all these subjects now, but I think it is necessary to make one or two points.

The "dialogue" — assuming that its philosophical and theoretical significance has been established — has a double sense: concrete and metaphorical. When we invite the world to engage in dialogue, two senses can naturally be envisaged. In a metaphorical sense, holding meetings and organizing exchanges, whether they be cultural, artistic, literary or scientific, are examples of dialogue.

This classification is not simply literary and rhetorical, for a deeper reflection on the real significance of dialogue requires that we get to grips with concepts that go beyond the metaphorical sense of the word.

The "dialogue among cultures and civilizations" embraces features which are apparently contradictory and sometimes even mutually opposed; on the one hand it is as ancient as human culture itself, on the other hand it is a new concept.

When this concept is apprehended in a "descriptive" manner it must be understood in its traditional and historical sense.

The "descriptive" sense of the "dialogue among civilizations" also requires a definition of "culture", "civilization" and "man" which is in harmony with the expression itself. The emphasis must therefore be placed on the collective aspect of human existence, as well as the universal and boundless aspect of culture and civilization, by insisting in particular on the fact that no great culture has come into being in isolation, in an exclusive manner and independently of others: only cultures

and civilizations which had within them the faculty of "dialogue", "expression" and "listening" have managed to endure.

The "dialogue among civilizations" understood in its "prescriptive" sense must be considered in reference to certain relationships such as those that exist between the politician and the artist or between morality and politics.

In that connection, what relationship is there between a prominent politician and an accomplished artist? Given that these are two totally different fields of human endeavour, the gap separating them is clear.

So where are the possible parallels and similarities between these two men? If we go beyond the trite attempt to liken politics to art, where the implication is that diplomatic subtleties are used in political relations, we can arrive at a relationship between the politician and the artist which is much more subtle and profound.

Whatever the current definition of the word "artist" may be according to the philosophy of art, one cannot ignore the fact that an artist is above all a person with the faculty of experiencing the "present", in such a way that he makes the moment "eternal".

To make the present eternal, so as to engender the "moment" in which he can create the work of art that we will admire when it reaches us, is in itself an act that only the greatest artists can accomplish.

The historical destiny of the work of art is fulfilled in this eternal present.

How can anyone deny that the historical destiny of peoples and nations has been fulfilled by great politicians who made history.

I do hope that these words will not remind you of old quarrels about such issues as the influence of "personality" on history, for I have not the least intention of entering into that debate. Especially as that question can only be asked if we make a distinction between the individual aspects of man and the collective aspects of his existence, although that is in any case, a purely arbitrary distinction.

In view of the above, we can see that what politician and artist have in common is their respective capacities, that is to say, their "creativity". "Creativity" in itself involves "innovation"; by definition it excludes any repetition or imitation. Creativity is developed in the human being as a function of his "courage". A great artist reappraises established artistic truths through his creativity and his courage, just as a great politician re-examines the fundamental and vital issues of his country through these same qualities of creativity and courage.

We hope that politicians will enjoy the same freedoms as artists in working towards the effective implementation of the "dialogue among civilizations", and that a decisive step may be taken towards a better, more equitable and more humane future.

In connection with the relationship between politics and morality in the context of the dialogue among cultures, which has already been the subject of much theorizing, it seems to me that a radical and profound change must take place in the specific practice of this political morality. I am thinking in particular, of respect and modesty when listening to others as well as loyalty to one's commitments, which are essential tools for successful cooperation and a real "dialogue among civilizations", in the political arena of international relations.

We must urge those States which rely on their economic and military power and which, being excessively proud, use might and domination to reach their goals, to opt for wisdom and dialogue.

This is not a matter of a simple formal change on the level of political and economic terminology, but a real change of heart. In other words, we must reconcile the rigour of logic with human sensitivities: "men are members of one and the same body, as they are created from one and the same essence" says our poet Saadi.

This concept should be taken into account not only at the level of national communities, but also at the international level.

Thanks to the change which will be wrought by scholars and artists inspired by humanity, we will avoid the formal language that prevails in the diplomatic world, and use a living language that is, above all, moral and human.

Another important aspect of the "dialogue among civilizations" is the term "dialogue" which is used here in a specific way. It should not be confused with other terms such as "reciprocal influence", "exchange" or "hegemony of cultures and civilizations". Reciprocal influences in the arena of civilizations and cultures, and cultural and scientific exchanges may have other foundations, such as war. Indeed, the hegemony of one form of civilization and culture over its rivals, imprinted sometimes by force and domination, began and is being perpetuated, in our time, with the help of communication technology.

This "dialogue" should be pursued on the basis of general, universal and pre-established principles, rather than a vision of the world that stems from a moral, political, religious and philosophical system based on power relationships.

It is the responsibility of organizations such as UNESCO to promote such principles.

Principles such as that of the "dialogue among civilizations" are just as much in opposition to the dogmatic principles of positivists and the axioms of modernists, as they are to the unlimited scepticism of post-modernists.

This is why one of the tasks of the intellectuals, defenders of the "dialogue among civilizations", is to review the philosophical basis and to interpret the intellectual basis of this theory, so that it will be free of all dogmatism, which is hostile to the search for truth, and free of the destructive influence of the endless scepticism of post-modernist thinkers, who, indifferent to the immense pain and suffering of thousands of disinherited and unfortunate human beings, believe that the desire for justice and resistance to oppression come from a metalanguage free of all philosophical explanation and justification.

One prerequisite for the "dialogue among civilizations" is tolerance. Here, we should be particularly attentive to the fact that it must not be a "negative tolerance" — which is a modern concept — but indeed "positive cooperation", as urged by oriental wisdom and religions.

If we sincerely wish the dialogue to become a new paradigm in international relations, it must transcend the stage of negative tolerance and become firmly committed to positive cooperation.

Few Muslims familiar with the Koran can hear the word cooperation without recalling the words of the Koran "Cooperate in good and piety". All human beings

have the right and should be able to collaborate in the reconstruction of the world at the beginning of this third millennium. No people can be held back from this undertaking because of a philosophical, political or economic argument. It is not enough just to tolerate others; we must work with them. The human world must be reconstructed by the growing cooperation of all its members.

Whereas, not long ago, these arguments sounded like a humanist slogan from the start of the twentieth century, today they represent a *sine qua non* of humanity's survival. We should not be content with cooperation in the political, economic and social arenas alone, but reflect on the means to bring minds and sensitivities closer together.

We cannot hope for an alliance of hearts, so long as the world continues to be dominated by dogmatic contradictions, whether philosophical, moral or religious in nature. Such an alliance will only be possible when there is a coming together of minds and that in turn, will only be achieved when the guardians of culture make a genuine effort to understand the real sense of the other's vision and to explain it to their own people.

It is appropriate to refer to the sense and concept of thought and sensitivity. Each person should express his or her own idea of the meaning of life, happiness and death. This effort to understand the other does not produce an immediate result, but unless the effort is made, any agreement based on political and economic interests can only be fragile and ephemeral.

Faith, which can only be a positive response from the inmost depths of the heart to an invitation from God, should not be understood as an immutable and static concept. In the same way, our understanding of religion should not contradict the spirit of faith. For such a contradiction would inevitably make any dialogue between religions impossible, and that dialogue is a pre-requisite to a lasting peace.

Just like the earthly food we receive each day, we should seek celestial food, which is a robust and fervent faith. To exist, faith should flow like a river because we cannot hope for anything from a marsh's stagnant waters. If faith flows permanently, it can yield the nourishing fruit of morals and peace. It is through constantly renewed faith that one can love mankind and the world.

Another aspect of the relationship between dialogue and peace is that only a certain type of peace can be compared to dialogue.

What we may call *pax romana* or "hegemonic" peace, is a peace guaranteed by force and law; it is subject to existing forces and interests. But, the peace obtained through dialogue and the rational and emotional maturity of man, depends on its own interests, which are the rational and psychological development of mankind. Since regression in the intellectual development process is almost impossible, the resulting peace is a lasting and broad-reaching peace, encompassing peace between cultures, religions, civilizations and also peace between man and nature.

I believe that, today, this peace between man and nature is paramount.

The relationship that, for many centuries, united man and nature and that allowed man to love nature, to take advantage of its bounty and to take refuge in it, has today been transformed into the over-exploitation and destruction of nature.

For centuries, man did not consider nature as a mere source of energy. This does not mean that he did not take advantage of its blessings and its resources, wherever his social and civil life evolved, or that there was no reciprocal adaptation between man and nature and a reasonable exploitation of the latter. Nevertheless, man had never reduced nature to the level of a mere object.

In all cultures and traditions, peoples and nations have had rites, and the time and place of celebration of these rites coincided with natural events. However, in this new age, so-called "disenchantment" (Entzauberung) has not only destroyed the celebration of these rites and the relationships between man and nature, but has created a situation where man no longer considers the world to be a "whole" with a life, a meaning and a purpose. Now, there is no longer any dialogues between man and nature; mountain, sea, forest and desert are merely different forms of inanimate mass.

The break in the profound and congenial relationship with nature is the prelude to the weakening of these same relationships among men.

The dialogue among civilizations and cultures should naturally examine the issues that are vital and urgent for mankind; and the foremost of these concerns the relationships between man and nature.

Having said this, we should now turn our attention to other aspects of the issue of the "dialogue among civilizations": what we learn from the morphology of civilization and culture leads us to examine the hypothesis of their "essence" and "quiddity".

This would appear to contradict what we have just said about the reciprocal influence of civilizations and cultures. What should we do? Negating either of these aspects is tantamount to denying the evidence — we cannot deny that there are different forms of culture and civilization, nor can we deny that they are constantly evolving and influencing one another.

Nevertheless, if we refine our philosophical reflection, it becomes clear that this difficulty is irrelevant to our discussion.

The theories about the "essence" and the "quiddity" of things are countered by others that consider these things to be dynamic and in movement.

This contradiction can be eliminated if we distinguish the following two aspects, the essential and the existential.

The essence, the reality and the definition of things and, in this case, cultures and civilizations, cannot and should not be denied. He who does not want to know, let him remain in ignorance said the poet.

On the one hand, we cannot acquire knowledge unless we retain the definition, the concept and the essence of things. On the other, if we neglect the "existential" aspect of things, this may lead us to forget the knowledge that has been acquired and, finally, to reject the reality and the mystical dimension of these things.

The "prescriptive" approach of the "dialogue among civilizations and cultures" allows us to tackle vital discussions on the world's current problems. Moreover, the most current problems of human societies were also among the most ancient concerns of men. Yesterday as today, mankind has thirsted for justice, peace, freedom and safety.

Peace is necessary in order to implement the "dialogue among civilizations" and once the dialogue has been established, long-term peace can be maintained.

When we say that peace is necessary for dialogue, it is evident that the word dialogue does not mean political discussions. Because, as we all know, in the course of history wars and discussions have often occurred in parallel.

Here dialogue does not mean resorting to diplomatic language in order to promote one's own political and economic interests and defeat the enemy, in other words, pursuing war by other means. There cannot be a "dialogue among civilizations and cultures" unless there is mutual understanding and esteem, and unless we make a sincere effort to understand the other rather than to triumph over him.

Some people may think that the "dialogue among civilizations and cultures" and the reciprocal influence of one on the other would lead to disorder and entropy, and they are not entirely wrong.

But in the first place, we can reduce the speed and the intensity of such an eventuality to a minimum through teaching and education. Secondly, we should note that "entropy" is inevitable in the course of mankind's existence and progress. To choose cultural decadence and death is no better than to choose life and the blossoming of cultures and civilizations. Of course, this choice is not without turmoil and difficulty.

Moreover, the idea of a "dialogue among civilizations" would be incomplete without an in-depth analysis of the roots of war and conflicts. Evidently, this analysis of conflicts should not be undertaken in isolation, without also analysing the current state of the world. Wars often have deep psychological roots that are studied by sciences such as psychology, social psychology and psychoanalysis, but they are also caused by political and economic factors.

We would be supremely naïve and simplistic if we were to summon people to peace and mutual understanding without, at the same time, attempting to reduce the fearsome gap between rich and poor that exists in many countries throughout the world, and without taking real measures to come to the aid of the world's underprivileged populations.

How can we speak of peace and security and ignore justice when, by the year 2000, 30 per cent of the world's population will be living in a state of absolute poverty? Even if the West were to act just to protect itself while ignoring the fate of the other regions of the world, it would have to assist the others in order to ensure its own security.

For social, political and technical reasons, the citizens of the world are today all passengers on the same boat; either we all weather the storm and reach the shore or we all perish. These remarks may seem rather exaggerated today, but they will surely be clearer and better understood tomorrow. On the dawn of the third millennium, our world will have a common fate which, if it is to be fair and auspicious, cannot be envisaged without a dialogue among the diverse cultures and civilizations.

In the twentieth century, everything centred on the strength of the sword, and there were winners and losers along the way, but we should realize that the principal focus of the next century must be on dialogue; otherwise, the sword will become a

double-edged steel blade that will spare nobody. Moreover, it is possible that the powerful warmongers will be among the first victims. This is one of the consequences of globalization.